

ALASKAN ESKIMO CARVERS of GAMBELL



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The Alaskan Eskimo village of Gambell, situated on the coast of Northwest Cape, St. Lawrence Island, looks out upon the icy, fog-bound waters of the Bering Sea—some 200 miles south of Nome on the Alaskan mainland, a mere 36 miles west to the shores of Siberia. The villagers, almost 500 strong today, are subsistence hunters who, primarily during the off-hunting season, create lively interpretations in walrus ivory of the sea mammals which for centuries have provided a chief source of food in the north.

A warm and friendly people, the villagers are Siberian Yupik-speaking Eskimos—now bilingual—who came under the protection of the American flag with the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867. Reflecting the increasing modernization of their lives, the village now includes an elementary and high school, two small grocery stores (one of which sells everything from groceries to outboard motors), a post office, two churches (started by missionaries), a community center for public meetings, potlucks, or Eskimo dancing, a council building and teen center, and, most recently, a washeteria. As there are few jobs available—postmaster, teacher's aides, store manager or airline agent—handcrafts such as carving and skin sewing have developed as the main source of cash income.

Gambell also remains an isolated spot, reached primarily by air today. Infrequent visits by non-natives bring bird-watchers, construction workers, missionaries, or archaeologists. Most welcome of all are buyers of ivory carvings who bring cash, which, in turn, helps buy clothing, hunting rifles, ammunition, snowmachines, outboard motors, gasoline and fuel oil—all of which have become the necessities of modern subsistence living.

In April, as the Bering Sea ice begins to break up, bowhead whales pass by St. Lawrence Island on their way north to the Arctic Ocean, and the hunting season begins. Although now limited in their strikes by international whaling agreements, intrepid Eskimo whalers still put forth onto the fog-bound sea in open, skin-covered frame boats called umiaks, with a crew comprising captain, tiller, spotter, and harpooner. In May, the walrus migrate north, and in June seals appear.

Of their seasonal kills, the walrus is especially important, not only as a major food source, but also for its ivory tusks which, when fashioned into carvings, bring the village an important source of income. But it is risky business. Spring hunting is overshadowed by the threat of sudden snow storms and shifting ice. In the fall, hunting is limited by weather and available light—with about five hours of hunting time a day. When a walrus is sighted, a skilled marksman aims for the hump at the base of the neck, a quick clean kill. He's well aware that a wounded walrus could attack a skinboat and spill the hunters into the frigid Bering Sea. After the walrus is butchered, the meat is dried for future meals, and the ivory is divided among the hunters. Today it is also a costly enterprise. As one of the hunter-carvers stated, "Walrus are not easy to find. We can spend 14 to 18 hours on the water. Getting one walrus would probably only make us break even, with all of our expenses. If a crew doesn't get any walrus in a day's hunt, it's a big loss—the price of gasoline and motor oil is always going up."

Throughout the summer the villagers also fish, crab and hunt birds. They gather eggs, seafood, greens, roots and berries. Much of the food is stored away for the winter months ahead, the "long" dark days and nights in the northland from November to March when the people turn to indoor activities, one of which is ivory carving.

At the current time there are over 40 hunter-carvers actively producing in the village. Most of the novice carvers learn from their fathers and village elders, while some are now also taught carving in the school. Many of the older carvers learned by experimenting. Fresh walrus ivory must be thoroughly dried—a minimum of about two months—to prevent it from cracking. The carver cross-cuts the tusk with a hacksaw—the wider the section, the larger the finished piece. Rough shaping is done free-hand, with a hand-held electric grinder. Sharp edges are rounded with files, while delineation of details is accomplished with a small graver. The surface is then sanded smooth and buffed to a rich lustre. On some pieces, realistic effects are accomplished by finely textured finishes, on others through engraving, with pigment rubbed in, to depict patterns of fur or other features. Inlays of baleen or ivory of contrasting hue are sometimes used for features such as eyes.

Experienced carvers frequently develop individual, recognizable styles. They often specialize in creating specific subjects, for which they become noted by virtue of their innovative conceptual treatments. Several carvers have pursued careers outside the village, like Harry Koozaata, famed for his depictions of bowhead whales (illus. 5), who now teaches carving in the Nome high school, or Doug Silook (illus. 1), who is exploring a carving career with his highly expressive talent in Anchorage.

The examples in this exhibition suggest the variety of modern works created by Gambell carvers today. Some older-style products are still made, like Miller Cambell's engraved cribbage board (illus. 4), a gaming implement popular with non-natives during the latter 19th century when Alaskan Eskimo carvers began adapting their handcrafts to the demands of non-native markets. But today, most contemporary carvers employ free-standing, small-scale figurines in walrus ivory as their primary form of expression. Some larger creations are made of whale bone (illus. 7), or are composite works of ivory (illus. 1). For the most part these modern figurines are devoted to subjects reflecting the Eskimo subsistence life-style, such as Eskimo men engaged in traditional hunting pursuits, or the birds and animals of the Eskimo homeland.

The majority of the carvings are strikingly simplified forms which nevertheless emphatically capture the essence of the subject. Birds, long a favorite motif in carving of the St. Lawrence Islanders, are today rendered in a great variety of concepts—from stylized owls to detailed, realistic depictions of eagles or ducks (illus. 3). Among the liveliest works are the sea mammals—walrus, whales, seals—whose sleek forms fairly vibrate with impressionistic naturalness (illus. 5). More recently several of the best carvers also have captured a sense of expressive movement, masterfully stated for such small-scale creations (illus. 2). More complex works, such as hunting scenes, are equally impressive in catching the spirit of the action represented (illus. 1 and 6).

Despite the remoteness of their island home in the north, the hunter-carvers of Gambell have succeeded in creating a lively artistry that both serves and expresses their unique subsistence life-style today; an artistry which has justifiably gained the attention of an increasingly appreciative audience.

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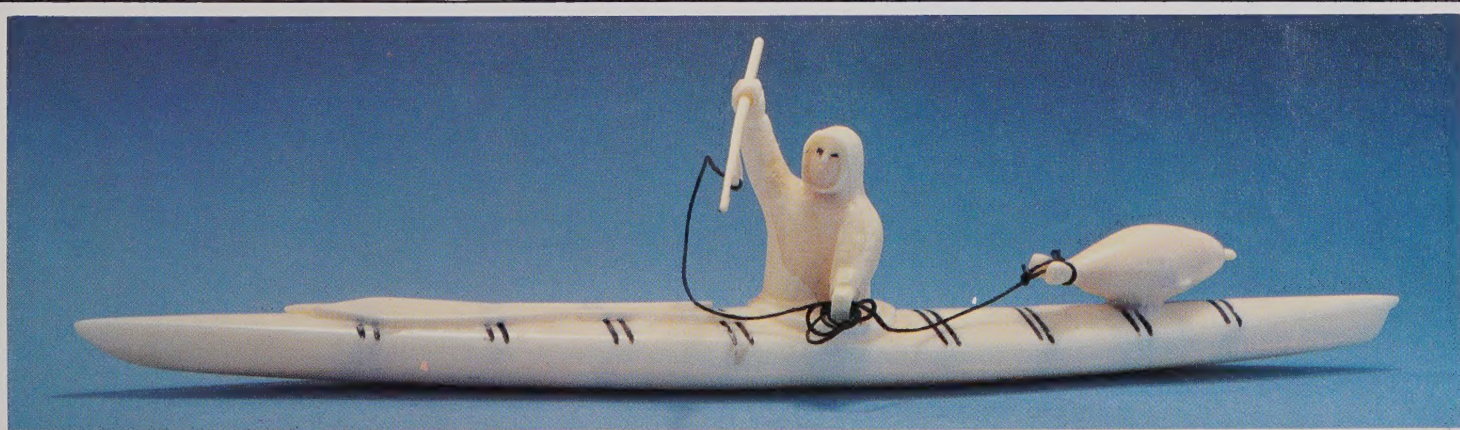
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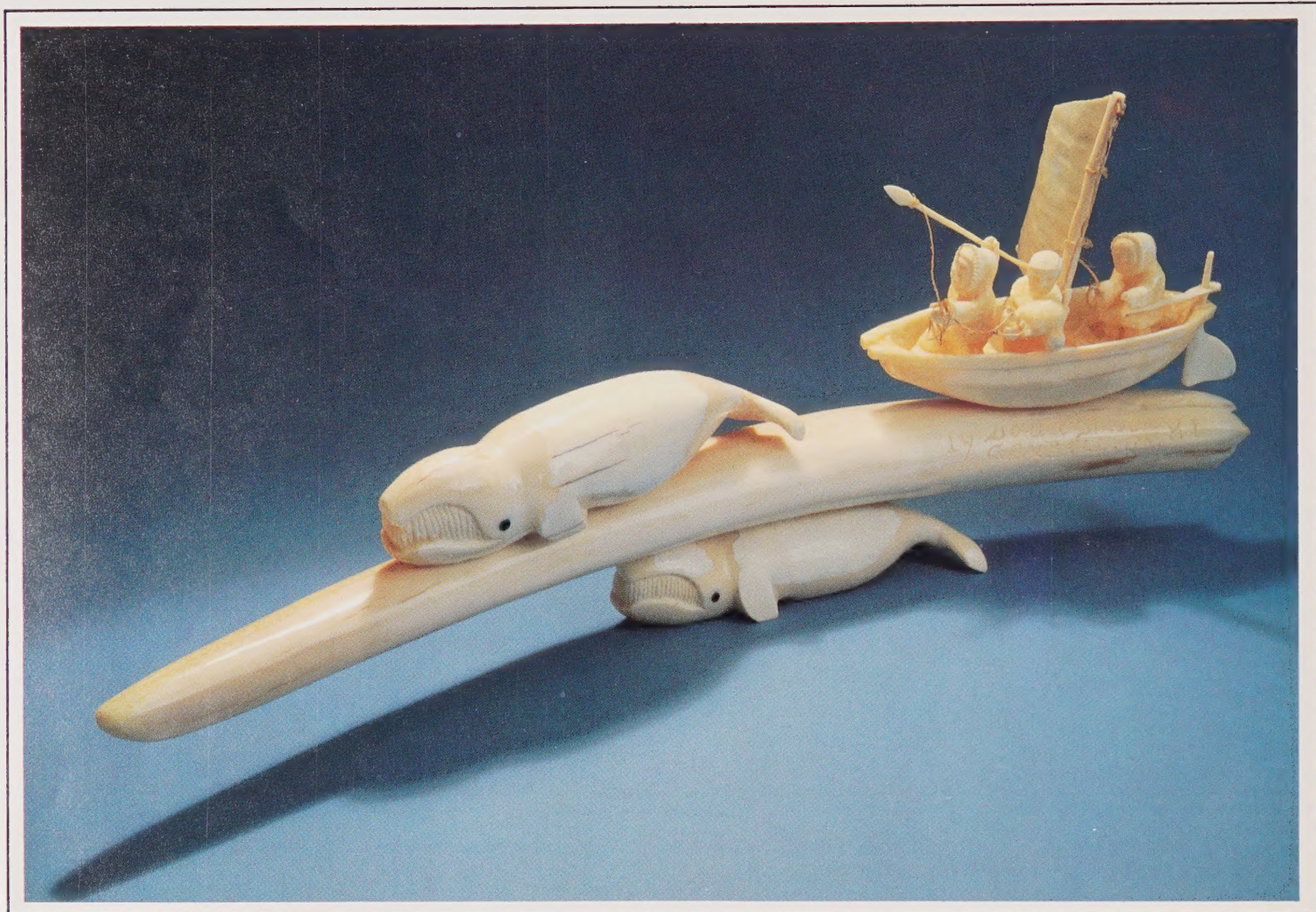
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5. *l-r, rear:* **POLAR BEAR**, Daniel Iyakitan; **BOWHEAD WHALE**, Harry Koozaata; *l-r, front:* **RINGED SEAL**, Frank Okhtokiyuk; **SEALS**, John Siluk, Jerry Tungyan; **SEA LION**, Holden Apatiki. All 1981. Walrus ivory; longest 5". © 1982 the artists.

6. Tom Iworrigan. **HUNTER IN A KAYAK**. 1980. Walrus ivory; L. 6-1/4". © 1982 Tom Iworrigan.





above:

1. **Doug Silook. OLD-TIME WHALING.** 1981. Walrus ivory; H. 7-1/4", L. 18-1/8". © 1982 Doug Silook.

cover:

2. **Wilson Oozeva. WALRUS.** 1981. Walrus ivory; L. 4-7/8". © 1982 Wilson Oozeva.

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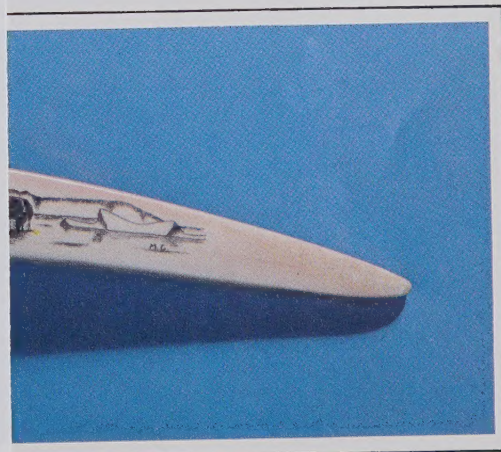
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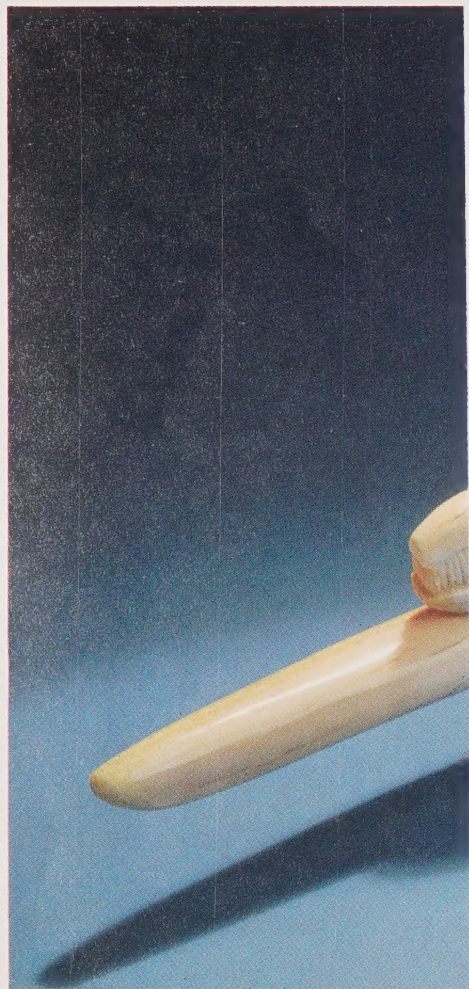
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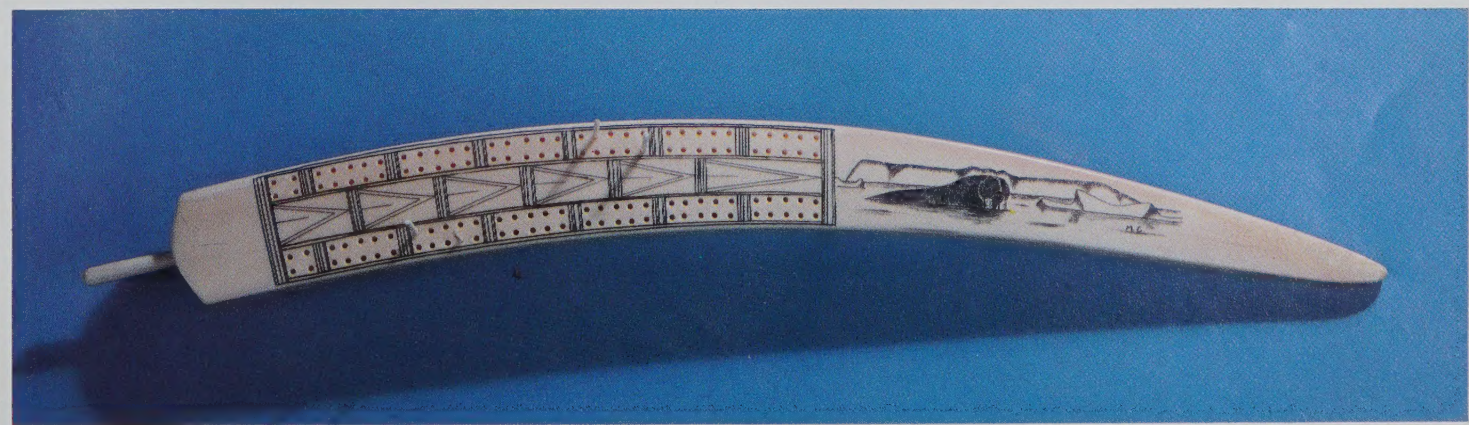






3. *l-r*: OWLS, Bert Oozeveseuk, Gordon Oozeveseuk, Tom Antogham; MURRE, Clement Ungott; DUCKS, Lane Iyakitan; EAGLE, Allen Kulakhon. All 1981. Walrus ivory; tallest 3-7/8". © 1982 the artists.

4. Miller Campbell. CRIBBAGE BOARD. 1981. Walrus ivory; L. 14-3/4". © 1982 Miller Campbell.





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An exhibition, August 1–Sept. 30, 1982, Southern Plains Indian Museum, Anadarko, Okla.



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7. Lewis Iyakitan. WALRUS. 1981. Whalebone, with walrus ivory tusks; H. 6-1/2". © 1982 Lewis Iyakitan.